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## RECENT LITERATURE.

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### I.

THERE is a kind of criticism which has in modern times come into fashion, of which Professor Goldwin Smith's "Cowper" is a fair example.\* As a condensed biography of the poet, his book may be of value to cursory readers, though we have failed to discover in it any fresh fact, or any evidence of original research. The materials which the author has employed were open to everybody, and were already familiar to every student of biography. Besides the somewhat heavy, and, we may say, stupid life by Hayley, we had already the very minute work of Southey; and, considering the entirely recluse existence of Cowper, we have sometimes thought it remarkable that we know so much of him, and are in possession of so many of the particulars of his singular and melancholy experiences. We owe this advantage—if it be an advantage—to the passion of evangelical persons for the smallest details of personal religion. Following the traditions which connect Newton, who is one of the saints of a special class of saintly persons, with the author of "The Task," these have pleased to regard the invalid and the hypochondriac as a wonderful example of the necessity of working out salvation with fear and trembling. Besides this, there have been unspeakable scandals circulated about Cowper, which we believe to be falsehoods, impure if simple. Professor Smith darkly alludes to this foolish gossip, but, if he has heard the worst of it, he does not say so.

It is doubtful whether the admirers of Cowper will be grateful for this new discussion of his infirmities. Surely, in such matters, there should be some law of limitation. What the poet did remains, and will remain while the English language is written, and some of it, of a proverbial kind, as long as it is spoken. But those

\* Cowper. By Goldwin Smith. New York: Harper & Brothers.

who love the tenderness of Cowper, his fresh and original relation to Nature, his kindly humor, his never ill-natured wit ; those who have been charmed by his domestic life in its best aspects, and think of him as preëminently the poet of home and of the domestic affections ; those who have found plenary evidence of his innate manliness in the strongest of his poems, and of his loving heart in the tenderest—may well ask to be excused from any further studies in morbid anatomy, from any further discussion of his weakness of body and of mind, from the prying curiosity which seeks to fathom the inscrutable, and from a renewal of the tragic tale of his infirmities. Evidently he was an invalid and a hypochondriac, with suicidal tendencies from the start. He had very old blood in his veins, and some of it was not of the best. His grandfather, the Chancellor, had been tried for murder. The poet was a weakly boy, and at Westminster School he had been ill treated. He was set to studying the law, because his grandfather had been a good lawyer, though nobody could have been less fitted for the profession than this timid and shrinking youth. At thirty-two he was a lunatic. There was an injudicious attempt to force him into the office of the Clerk of the Journals in the House of Lords, and he tried to kill himself because a horror of the publicity of the place had disturbed his intellect. Thus far, it will be observed, religion had nothing to do with his melancholy. Nor can it be held justly that it had anything to do with his subsequent despondencies. If he had remained a man of the world—if he had, at intervals, continued “to giggle and make giggle” with the London wits—it is more than probable that he would still have been subject to fits of despondency, though the remorse which he experienced would have been occasioned by secular rather than religious influences. He was a sick man all his life.

It is with pleasure that we turn from this melancholy view of Cowper’s character, and consider what a noble work he performed in spite of a hundred adverse circumstances. All here is fresh and beautiful. Usually he is cheerful, almost always he is vigorous ; his poetic sense invested the homeliest natural and social objects with an exquisite charm, and he absolutely rescued English poetry from studied artificiality. Grateful for the pure enjoyment which his poetry gives us, let us try, at least while we read it, to forget that clouds and shadows were about him as he wrote, and that he smiled at the world through his bitter tears ! Let us not suffer impertinent and over-curious discussion to disturb our appreciation

of one of the sweetest, most scholarly, and most vigorous of English poets !

## II.

SPECIMENS of the English poets, selections from their works with brief biographies appended, are not a novelty in literature. The work has before been done by Anderson, by Dr. Aikin, by Hazlitt, and by Thomas Campbell, some of whose critical notices are among the best things which ever came from the pen of that singularly unequal writer. We have here another book of "Elegant Extracts," in the matters of taste and critical judgment superior, perhaps, to any of its predecessors.\* Mr. Matthew Arnold, in his introduction, goes over the whole ground of what are and what are not English classics, and is particularly ample in his criticism of Chaucer and of Burns, while he has a good deal to say of what poetry is, and of how it should be read, with other writing of that speculative character of which the present generation of readers seems to be specially fond. Notices of the other poets are by other writers of greater or less reputation. All of them appear to be carefully written. And the plan, it is evident, has great advantages. A single editor, bringing to his work preconceived notions, and his preferences, if not his prejudices, might easily fall into unintentional injustice, while experience has amply shown that the general effect of his researches might be monotonous.

The exact value of compilations of this character is a little doubtful. To the thorough and earnest student it is necessarily small. Poets are not to be judged by tid-bits, and great works must suffer by this sort of dissection. Perhaps no writer can be fairly estimated by "specimens" of his production. He would have a right to say, if he could speak to the matter, that the interposition of a middleman to tell the reader what he is and what he is not to admire, is impertinent. If poetical literature shall increase in bulk in the future as it has in the past, and is still increasing at present, some guide will become absolutely necessary to those who would not waste precious time. The worst of "specimens" is, that they can give no idea of the artistic proportions of the great works from which they are rudely severed. They are incomplete, however complete in themselves they may appear to be. It might be cruel to ask anybody at this time of day to read the "Paradise Lost" or

\* The English Poets: Selections with Critical Introductions by Various Writers, and a General Introduction by Matthew Arnold. Edited by Thomas Humphrey Ward, A. M. 2 vols. London and New York: Macmillan & Co.

"The Faerie Queen" from beginning to end ; but it would be equally cruel to ask him to make up his mind critically about these great poems from half a dozen shreds and fragments of them, however judiciously selected. This remark, of course, does not apply to many entire poems of the shorter kind which are included in these volumes. Nor would we be understood to say that they are nothing better than crutches for the critically lame, or lifts for the hopelessly lazy. But, while they may help the young reader in forming his poetical taste, there can be no harm in cautioning him to search for himself in the great mine of English poetry which is so full of wealth, and alas ! of rubbish. One should not be always in leading-strings ; and no man can study for another, especially in this department of literature.

A work like this is full of somewhat melancholy suggestions. The perishable nature of poetical fame is inevitably indicated by these efforts to preserve or revive it. How many who have been of great consideration in their own day, in even the day following, are now known only to scholars, and to those who search in libraries for works which are no longer upon the counters of the booksellers ! To be ancient is to be obsolete. The lyrical writers, if once they get a hold upon the hearts of the people, are comparatively safe ; and brevity is often a passport to a precarious remembrance. But if every time sings its own songs as it should, it will not care much, in a popular sense, for the songs which are a century or two old. The very greatest poems in all languages can be counted upon the fingers of one hand. Yet our bards still go on with their production, and every week witnesses the birth of a new book of verses. If any of these shall be remembered sufficiently at some distant day to be included in a volume of "specimens," we can not wish their writers more judicious and sensible treatment than Mr. Ward's corps of critics has bestowed upon the English poets from Chaucer to Dryden, and promise to extend to the others from Dryden to Keble and Clough.

### III.

THERE are lyrics, at once light, elegant, and ingenious, which charm by their manner and disarm criticism by their jocund harmlessness ; Mr. Austin Dobson's poems \* are of this description. Mr. Edmund C. Stedman, in the introduction which he has furnished to

\* Vignettes in Rhyme, and other Verses. By Austin Dobson. New York : Henry Holt & Co.

the American edition, tells us that Mr. Dobson is forty years of age, and has been a government clerk for twenty-two years. There is little suggestion of even twoscore in this pretty book, but only a certain easy and salient elasticity ; and, if there are occasionally tears in the verses, they but lend fresh brilliancy to the light and lilting measure. The book, though neither serious nor earnest, has the sweetness which comes of constitutional good nature, and the polished politeness which befits songs of this description. In many of the poems there is a flavor of antiquity not in the least dusty or moldy, however ; and there is everywhere that indefinable *bric-à-brac* beguilement which betrays collectors into the purchase of old china and prettily painted statuettes.

Mr. Dobson's book will be invaluable to those verse-makers who desire to distinguish themselves by writing in the old metres which have been lately revived—the rondel, the rondeau, and the ballade. Now and then, as we read him, we seem to hear the tinkling of lutes and the sweet warbling of minstrels under the windows of bowers which went long ago to dust, with their pretty and piquant inmates. Sometimes his songs remind us of the ingenious verses which break the dull and indecent monotony of Dryden's horrible comedies. We do not agree with Mr. Stedman in thinking that Mr. Dobson is like Horace, for Horace always had an earnest and serious purpose, even in his lightest mood, and never for a moment indulges in eccentricities of thought or of meter. Mr. Dobson is like Horace, however, in always writing like a gentleman ; and if he sometimes cloys us by his unremitting sweetness, we have only to lay the book aside for a little while, with a certainty that the appetite for these fine cates and delicacies will be sure to return.

## IV.

In this prosaic age and in this over-busy land, the men who devote themselves to literary pursuits and “strictly meditate the thankless Muse,” are entitled to much more consideration than they are likely to receive. Mr. Richard Henry Stoddard has long been known as a poet of no ordinary capacity ; but we must own to a degree of surprise, upon looking into his handsome volume,\* to find how much he has written. We may as well acknowledge at once a feeling of regret that such a poet as Mr. Stoddard undoubtedly is should not have given us some work of greater artistic propor-

\* *The Poems of Richard Henry Stoddard. Complete edition. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.*

tions—not an epic, to be sure, since it seems that the world is to have no more epics; but a poem in which his remarkable power of construction and copious resources of diction might have been more largely displayed. For there is more than one poem in this volume which shows how strong is the sweep of Mr. Stoddard's genius, and what a thorough master he is of literary resources. His life has been that of the scholar, if not of the recluse; his tastes, originally and naturally delicate, have been matured until it would not be saying too much to call them simply perfect; he has hand and eye, and all else that a poet should have—fancy, subtilty, and imagination. Above all, he has absolute literary sense. Here is a volume, containing we hardly dare to say how many separate and distinct poems—there are thousands of verses; a hundred different forms are employed; the range of subjects is wide and various—and yet we doubt if the most fastidious critic could detect in the whole a really bad line or a single solecism, or a passage which it would be easy to improve. Nobody, who has not had some experience of the matter, can know how much labor all this implies. We are sorry to say that not many American poets have written after this fashion. They may have, in some rare cases, the genius, but few of them have the patience, to do it. We do not propose to make any odious comparisons; but those who think that slovenly writing is a mark of genius, and who have been told so by their admiring critics, would do well to learn a lesson from this pains-taking poet.

Mr. Stoddard is fond of a short song, which he polishes with all the care with which a lapidary polishes a gem. He likes a bit of exquisite verse which shall be *teres atque rotundus*. The loving care with which he has perfected many of these little poems is evident in their grace, tenderness, depth of feeling, and frequent depth of thought. Open the book almost anywhere and you come across them. It is a volume to keep upon the table, and to read in during a spare moment. The brief music is like that of a bird, who gives a rapid and complete and most melodious refrain, and then flies away. Sometimes the strain is a sad one; oftener it is calmly serene, and there is not a whine in this whole collection, which is more than can be said of a great many volumes of American poetry. Indeed, we have been much impressed by the thorough manliness of Mr. Stoddard's work. He is often pensive, as all men who think poetically must be; but he is never maudlin. There are evidences of sorrow, and unrest, and disappointment; but the reader may be

assured that they give no tone to the book, which, take it for all in all, is at least as healthy a volume of poems as there is in the English language. Mr. Stoddard is an artist, and an artist must sometimes paint the gloomy as well as the glad ; but the general tenor of his work shows the writer to be a well-balanced and even square-shouldered man, who knows precisely what he is about, and manages even the minor key with an energy which we might call robust if it were less musical. There is tragedy in these poems and sometimes pathos, but they spring naturally from the topic, and are not pumped up for the occasion.

Many of Mr. Stoddard's poems have, indeed, a half-sportive character. Doing well whatever he undertakes, he writes *vers de société* sometimes with an easy *abandon*, which proves how sure he is of his hand. There are occasional poems, too, suggested by current topics, which are strong and self-sustained. There is a sufficient love of Nature, and frequent passages which prove it genuine. But Mr. Stoddard is substantially a poet of the passions and of the emotions ; and not seldom he rises to a height of tragic expression, and depicts the darker experiences of the soul with unusual force. Yet, as we have said, he is never unpleasantly subjective. He is too good at his art for that. What is to be sung he sings naturally. What is to be told he tells in a straightforward, earnest way ; and with all his other merits he has unusual power of poetical narrative. His whole book may be heartily commended to all those who care for healthy and natural poetry, and who have no desire to be either puzzled or bored.

## v.

THERE are poets who, however they may change for the better in other respects, never outgrow their mannerisms. It has been said of Mr. Wordsworth that he lost the world for a quibble, and was content to lose it. Mr. Browning is represented as having lately expressed some regret, not that he has been an obscure writer, for his own conscience doubtless acquits him upon that score, but that the majority of his readers should have found him so. Mr. Swinburne, in this new volume of poems,\* exhibits the same peculiarities which marked his earlier works. There is the same audacity of diction, profusion of double epithets, muscular and sometimes spasmodic versatility of metre, and unbridled exuberance of imagination. Though to many the principal poems in this little

\* Songs of the Springtides. By Algernon Charles Swinburne. New York : R. Worthington.

volume will be insoluble puzzles, it will be read with great satisfaction by those who do not trouble themselves about sense, if only they are gratified by sound. If they do not understand, they will think that they do, which perhaps is just as well. There is something very fascinating about Mr. Swinburne's lyrical swing and ever-shifting variety of versification, and we wander through his pages as through some land of faery or wilderness of mingled beauty and terror. Perhaps we should not err in pronouncing him, though he does not use dramatic forms, the most dramatic of modern poets, for in his works there are often the most subtle delineations of human passion, and the most vigorous pictures of the deepest, the darkest, and the brightest experiences of human life. It seems to us that the poems in this volume are among the most intellectual which he has produced. As he has advanced in years he has lost something of that downright sensuousness which once shocked some readers of his works, and, we are obliged to add, delighted others. Whatever else it may be, this volume is at least cleanly, with no touch of prurience and no suspicion of physical coarseness.

The present volume contains Mr. Swinburne's "Birthday Ode for the Anniversary Festival of Victor Hugo"—the fine tribute of a man of genius to the genius of another. The idea of the poem is thoroughly original. Anything exactly like this piece of rhythmical criticism we do not remember to have seen in the literature of any language. All the great works of Hugo are chronologically alluded to, and, lest there should be any misunderstanding on the part of the reader, Mr. Swinburne has annexed a catalogue of Hugo's books, with reference to the places in which they are treated in the ode. He shares the Frenchman's hearty hatred of the last Emperor of France, and prints a special sonnet "On the Profane Desecration of Westminster Abbey, by the Erection of a Monument to the Son of Napoleon III." He keeps no terms with "the poisonous race," and calls upon the "elect of England's dead" to leave the abbey in disgust. Accustomed to use plain language on all occasions, Mr. Swinburne particularly uses it upon this; and speaks of Dean Stanley in a way which will shock the friends and admirers of that amiable divine—

"Who had the glory of these graves in trust,  
And turned it to a hissing."

CHARLES T. CONGDON.